

INTERNATIONAL

South Korean Opposition Alters Tactics

Former Exile Joins the Fitful Journey to Democracy

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 SEOUL, South Korea—The first time Lee Shim Bom was tortured, his Korean Central Intelligence Agency interrogator punched his face. That was mild compared with what was to come.

On and off from 1969 to 1983, the dissident was beaten with sticks, denied sleep for days, subjected to electric shock and hung from a bar like a bird on a spit, the "roast chicken" torture. Mr. Lee's crime was organizing demonstrations and editing underground newspapers to demand democracy. But repression was in full swing in Korea then, and democrats were considered dangerous. In 1983, after three convictions (two for sedition) and more than four years in jail, he fled into exile in the U.S.

Now Mr. Lee, 38 years old, is back and working with the opposition again. But this time it is "political" opposition, rather than the opposition in the streets, that occupies his time. Mr. Lee isn't lavish in his praise of the new government of President Roh Tae Woo; that it is "a little different" from its repressive predecessors is the best he can muster. But it is different enough that Mr. Lee, like many moderates, has decided it is easier to change things by joining the system than by trying to overthrow it. So he is working with a group of politicians and would-be politicians to establish a unified opposition party.

Difficult Transition

Mr. Lee's odyssey from Amnesty International's "prisoner of conscience" list to the political mainstream illustrates Korea's ongoing national journey from authoritarianism to democracy.

It is a transition few developing countries have made, and it isn't without its fits and starts, including for Mr. Lee. Last July, the government gave him amnesty for his two most recent convictions and said his civil rights were restored. But then the government said the amnesty didn't cover his other conviction and blocked his attempt to run for a National Assembly seat.

"It's a very sad decision," says Mr. Lee. "It's outrageous that the government treats reformists this way. I have never been a revolutionary."

Says a Korean professor who doesn't have any particular love for Mr. Lee, "I don't understand why the government makes these kinds of clumsy mistakes." A government spokesman responds that the decision was simply the neutral application of Korean law.

Same Old Apparatus

Nonetheless, critics suggest that Mr. Lee's non-amnesty typifies the Roh administration's half-hearted approach to reform. They note that the military and security apparatus are still largely in the same hands they were in more-repressive administrations, and that the police have cracked down on campus demonstrations. One Western diplomat estimates 500 political prisoners are in jail or awaiting trial despite a recent amnesty.



Lee Shim Bom

Until recently, Mr. Lee was relatively optimistic about the new government. "It's time for the opposition to come out of the streets and into the system," he was fond of saying. Now his line is, "I tried to come into the system, but the Roh administration seems to want to push me back into the streets."

But despite the caveats, "The change is a genuine one," says Hong Sa Duk, a National Assembly member and a leader of the movement to unify the opposition. "It's inevitable for the ruling party and President Roh to democratize this country. Success in industrialization necessitates democracy."

Mr. Lee learned political outspokenness from his father, a small landowner and teacher of Confucianism, who was arrested for his criticisms by three regimes—the Japanese colonialists, the North Korean invaders and Korea's first post-war president, Syngman Rhee.

By the time the younger Mr. Lee entered Seoul National University, he was an activist. "People said, 'Don't waste your time in politics. You won't be able to make any influence,'" he remembers.

Complicated Efforts

Now, after the fall of Korea's dictatorship, the efforts of reformists like Mr. Lee have grown more complicated. The hatred of the government that once united moderate and radical opponents has lost its force. Also undercutting Mr. Lee's influence are his strong U.S. ties, which don't jibe well with the virulent anti-Americanism that prevails among the opposition.

Mr. Lee used his powers of persuasion in the U.S. from 1983 to 1987, lobbying on Capitol Hill for human rights in Asia. He won the confidence of several U.S. congressmen and their aides. "He learned American politics very quickly," says George Stephanopoulos, chief of staff for Democratic Rep. Edward Feighan of Ohio. "He was the motivating force behind a number of congressional resolutions calling for democracy in Korea."

Some of Mr. Lee's activist friends say his views moderated in the U.S. Mr. Lee retorts that he was always a moderate, interested mainly in democracy.

When Mr. Lee wasn't actually in prison he was often on the lam. S.H. Lim, a college classmate who says he has always been apolitical, remembers a night in 1973 when Mr. Lee and a friend came to his house unexpectedly. "I knew they were on the wanted list. They slept one night in my house. Ten minutes after they left, the police came."

Even when Mr. Lee wasn't hiding, he lived in one-room slum apartments with no heat or toilet, because if he had lived with his family, police would have harassed them. After he started dating a college student, Lee Myung Yu, the police hounded her. Mr. Lee couldn't get a job because the government blacklisted him.

Wife Aids Release

But the hard times never discouraged Mr. Lee, even when, while in jail and convinced that his wife (he had married Lee Myung Yu) was in danger from the authorities, he passed word through a visiting

lawyer that she should emigrate to the U.S. When Mr. Lee was jailed again in the early 1980s and subjected to almost three years of meager rations and frequent solitary confinement, his wife's torrent of letters to U.S. congressmen and newspapers and her threat to fast in front of the United Nations helped get him released.

He says he had "mixed feelings" about fleeing. The decision to return to Korea was much easier. In 1987, the support middle-class Koreans were giving student protestors seemed a powerful portent. Within days of Mr. Roh's announcement that Korea would hold a democratic presidential election, Mr. Lee was on a plane back to Korea.

To illustrate how far Korean politics have come, Mr. Lee tells a story. One recent morning, an agent from the successor agency to the Korean CIA visited his office seeking information about a leading opposition politician. Mr. Lee ordered the agent out, saying that he had been tortured in the past and that if the agency tried anything this time, he would file a lawsuit. "No, no, no," said the agent, departing. "Those days are over."